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PRINCE ALBERT'S MERIDIAN BISON COMPANY TAKES THE HIGH ROAD TO VALUE-ADDING

Two friends of over 20 years, two neighbours and an undying entrepreneurial spirit: that pretty much describes Terry Rock and Michel Dubé. The former is a retired wildlife biologist; the latter, a businessman who owns a successful fishing lodge at Oliver Lake in northern Saskatchewan. Together they launched the Meridian Bison Company in 2001.

"I have had some land up here for quite a while," says Dubé, "and I was renting it out to my neighbour. Terry had 160 acres at the time—he just approached me to see if I wanted to raise livestock. He was more interested in elk because he had worked quite a bit with wild elk as a biologist. I said, 'No, not elk. It isn't something that interests me.' We were just talking, and he asked, 'How about buffalo?' I said, 'Buffalo? OK.' I started researching this a little bit. We started fencing that spring, and put our first animals in there in October of that year.

"We raise them until they are 24 months, slaughter them and sell the meat almost exclusively at the retail level to individuals. We have a list of clients we have developed, and people contact us, or we contact them once in a while to find out if they want some meat, and they can buy one pound or a whole animal if they want."

Between them, Rock and Dubé now have about 1,200 acres of land in hay and pasture.

"There are 200 acres here, 300 acres there: three or four parcels of land in all. Not everything is fenced. Some of the land is used to grow hay, which we bale. We have about half of the land fenced off at the moment. We pretty much grass-feed our animals. We use the hay mostly in the winter to supplement their grazing. They graze from, basically, June 1 to December 1, depending on snow conditions."

Every two weeks or so during the winter, the partners bring in 25 to 30 round bales that they run through a bale processor.

"It basically shreds the hay. We put two of the 1,500-pound bales on the machine, and it shoots it out on the side. We sometimes supplement the hay with oats to maximize the cows' protein and health levels so their breeding success is higher."

The company has customers in Regina, Saskatoon and Prince Albert, and has also created a niche serving the francophone community as far away as Manitoba and Alberta by placing advertisements in the provincial French weekly *L'Eau Vive*.

"It is snowballing," says Dubé of the company's market, "and we have an e-mail marketing list that has also helped get the word out."

The pair is looking at doubling their herd within the next two years. They want to diversify into two different areas: one is an on-farm retail store which will feature all types of meat and value-added products like patés and prepared meals; the other is the creation of a separate herd of purebred Plains bison. (Their animals are currently a Woods/Plains bison crossbreed.)

"We realize that, in order to be successful financially in this operation, we have to value-add," explains Dubé. "We make jerky and pepperoni. Right now, in Saskatchewan and any other agricultural areas in Canada, we are not paid what we need to be paid to be economically viable. The price of commodities, whether they are grain beef, bison or anything else, is low and in Saskatchewan, particularly so, because of the nature of the economy."

Dubé is thankful for his business experience.

"It certainly has helped, because I don't have a formal business education. We are able to navigate through the different steps and jump through the different hoops to bring about a profitable situation. And we are also not scared to try things out because, in business, you have to try things to succeed. Sometimes you do, sometimes, you don't. Hopefully you do."

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ALFALFA HELPS IMPROVE THE PROFITABILITY OF CATTLE PRODUCTION

Inputs now comprise such a large share of farm production costs that producers are starting to rethink their approaches to production, according to Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Forage Development Specialist Trevor Lennox.

"One of the tools cattle producers have is legumes," he says. "I work with cattle producers, and alfalfa is by far the best resource we can work with because it fixes its own nitrogen and produces such good quality forage."

Insufficient nitrogen is the main factor limiting forage production potential on the prairies, he says.

"Water is your number one driving factor; next is nitrogen. With legumes, we have a plant that can provide a lot of its own nutrition. Meanwhile, our atmosphere contains 78 per cent nitrogen. It is a huge, vast resource of nitrogen. We just need to harness the power of legumes to pull nitrogen out of the air and fix it in the soil."

Nitrogen fixation occurs mainly in the roots of legumes that form a symbiotic association with a bacteria species called rhizobia.

"Nitrogen fixation is directly related to the ability of legumes to accumulate energy through photosynthesis. Thus, leaf removal decreases nitrogen fixation, and leaf regrowth increases the potential for nitrogen fixation. Legumes not only fix nitrogen for their own needs, they are also able to supply nitrogen for non-nitrogen-fixing forage crops. In fact, they primarily supply nitrogen to forage plants following decomposition."

While legumes are still growing, mycorrhizal fungi can form a bridge between the root hairs of legumes and nearby grasses. This bridge facilitates the transport of fixed nitrogen from legumes to linked grasses. Depending on the nitrogen content of the soil and the mix of legumes and grasses in a pasture, legumes can transfer between 20 and 40 per cent of their fixed nitrogen to grass during the growing season.

Think of it this way: a pasture composed of at least 20 to 45 per cent legumes—on a dry weight basis—can provide the majority of the nitrogen needed by the forage stand.

When alfalfa constitutes a significant portion of the forage stand, it has the potential to fix 70 to 198 pounds of nitrogen per acre per year. Under irrigation conditions in southern Alberta, a pure stand of alfalfa has been shown to fix up to 267 pounds per acre per year. It is far cheaper to include a legume in a forage mix than to plant a grass and make annual applications of nitrogen fertilizer.

On another level, Lennox believes including legumes as part of the forage mix is necessary if nitrogen fixation is to provide a source of nitrogen for the pasture system.

"Rotational grazing is a management tool that has been shown to help maintain the proportion of alfalfa in mixed pastures," he

says.

But can cattle graze safely on pure alfalfa?

"When grazing cattle on pastures with a high component of alfalfa, bloat is a very real management problem," says Lennox. "However, a product called Alfasure is now available to control bloat. It has been on the market for a couple of years. In a series of grazing trials conducted across Western Canada, Alfasure has been almost 100 per cent effective at eliminating bloat in cattle."

According to reports from those trials, yearling heifers grazing alfalfa gained an average of 1.5 to two pounds per day, and steers gained between two and 2.5 pounds per day. Stocking densities were two to three times higher on straight alfalfa than on grass and grass/legume pastures.

"When applied at the recommended rate, Alfasure costs 15 to 25 cents per head per day, depending upon the weight of the animal," says Lennox. "The drawback is that it needs to be applied through water, which requires restricting livestock access to only one watering source."

To find out more about this product, contact your local veterinarian or the manufacturer (Rafter 8) in Calgary at 1-800-461-8615.

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THUNDER RAIL A MADE-IN-THE-NORTHEAST SOLUTION TO BRANCH LINE CLOSURES

Around Arborfield, everyone has high hopes for Thunder Rail, a homegrown railway initiative designed to alleviate the consequences of the closure of the local CN line five years ago.

"We had to raise between \$285,000 to \$300,000," explains Thunder Rail General Manager Danny Edwards. "We didn't really have to go out and canvas for shares; people overwhelmingly came to us. It was almost more than we could handle. Everybody is on board with it."

Thunder Rail was formed out of necessity brought on by the closure of the branch line. The RM of Arborfield and the towns of Arborfield and Zenon Park convinced CN to sell them the branch line instead of tearing it up. At that point, Carlton Trail Rail took it over and ran it for five years, but they decided that it wasn't profitable. Carlton Trail left, and the locals were left with no choice but to form their own short line rail company.

Thunder Rail's shareholders are 50 local people or companies. The two major investors are Arborfield Dehy Limited and Arborfield Grain Producers Ltd., and there are 48 other smaller shareholders.

"The company is doing very well for its first year," says Edwards. "I have only been in the short line business for six months myself, so it is difficult to compare it to anything. My background is fertilizer, chemicals, farm input sales. I have learned so much, and the learning curve is very steep."

Thunder Rail has 19.5 miles of their own line, and they use some of CN's main line out to Murphy Siding, so in total, the short line covers approximately 23 miles. The company doesn't own any cars, but it does have its own locomotive and all the necessary track maintenance equipment such as snow ploughs, ballast regulator and tamper and tie inserters.

Thunder Rail's major clients are its two major shareholders, explains Edwards.

"In Arborfield, the dehy plant is the main industry. Without the railroad, it wouldn't survive. We can't afford to ship that much

product out of here by truck. Without the rail line, the dehy industry is gone, and the town is in big trouble. We had to make the rail work."

Now that the new company is going strong, there are a few things in the works.

"We want to see the dehy do well here and the town stay in good shape, and we also want to expand. It seems that CN would like to see someone else do the main car handling and assembly work for them, so all they have to do is pull up with the engines, hook up and go off to the coast. I foresee a lot more branch line closures, and, since we are already established in the northeast, there will be room for us to expand."

The company is projecting handling around 500 cars annually, but there are projects under way that might bring that number up to 700 or 800 cars.

"Things happen very quickly in the railroad business," says Edwards. "You never know, we might get a phone call tomorrow from people who tell us, 'Hey! We would like you to run this for us.'"

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TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT UNDER WAY FOR THE SASKATCHEWAN ORGANIC INDUSTRY

The Saskatchewan Organic Directorate (SOD) has received funding from Saskatchewan Learning's Sector Partnerships Program to carry out a training needs assessment study of the Saskatchewan organic sector, according to Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Agri-Business Development Specialist Don Perrault.

"The organic sector in Saskatchewan is growing rapidly and encompasses approximately 1,200 producers in all areas of the province," he says. "Saskatchewan is a leader in the organic sector in Canada. Based on an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) survey conducted in 2003, about one-third of all Canadian organic producers are located in Saskatchewan. Fifty-eight per cent of all land in organic production in Canada is in Saskatchewan."

Perrault believes organic production presents an excellent growth opportunity for this province.

"This is due to our abundance of agricultural land and our reputation for a clean environment. The markets for organic food are strong, and are growing at 15 to 20 per cent per year. It is also one of the sectors in agriculture that continues to be profitable."

For this reason, SAF has identified organic farming as an opportunity area.

"We have a good foothold in this industry. We need to motivate producers to take advantage of the opportunities in this market."

Education and training are critical elements in expanding any new sector of the economy, Perrault explains.

"We hope that the training needs assessment will provide insight into the needs of the organic industry and the appropriate learning models which will help propel this sector forward."

The study will also look at the feasibility of an Organic Learning Centre in the province. A steering committee made up of representatives from the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, the Sagehill Business Development Corporation, the Carlton Trail Regional College, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Arts and Science, the Saskatchewan Organic Directorate, the Prairie Ursuline Centre at Bruno and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food has been put in place to provide direction to the study.

In January, Lorraine Beaudette of Sage Management Services of Saskatoon was retained to carry out the needs assessment.

"She has already established contact with many of the certification bodies in the province and a few producer groups," says Perrault. "Over the next few weeks, Sage Management Services will be surveying the various organic sector stakeholders to obtain their views on future learning needs, preferred delivery methods, use of technology and other areas of interest."

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CANARYSEED CHECK-OFF IN EFFECT MAY 1

Canaryseed growers can look forward to improved market development now that the canaryseed check-off is in effect, according to Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Special Crops Specialist Ray McVicar.

"The check-off is now in place, with the Government of Saskatchewan approving the regulations to establish the Canaryseed Development Commission of Saskatchewan (CDCS)," he says. "So we have a brand new organization mandated to support research into new uses for canaryseed, including human consumption; to support plant breeding and agronomy research; and to attract other development support, such as government funding that is only available with matching money."

McVicar feels the CDCS will put growers in the driver's seat.

"In January and February of 2005, the Canaryseed Association of Canada (CAC) hosted information meetings in Saskatoon and Eston to discuss the check-off with producers and industry representatives. At each meeting, the CAC used a secret ballot to survey growers' support for the check-off. Of those growers who completed the ballots, 73 per cent supported the check-off."

The canaryseed check-off has been discussed at grower meetings and field days, as well as in a number of news releases and farm publications for the past two years. There have been numerous opportunities for growers to voice their opinion and ask questions about the check-off.

The check-off is mandatory but refundable. The check-off level will be \$1.75 per net tonne on commercial sales of canaryseed. Canaryseed grown for seedstock will be exempt. Growers will be registered if they have sold canaryseed within the past three years. There will be two opportunities per year for producers to apply for a refund.

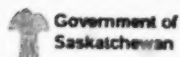
The CDCS has hired Levy Central of Saskatoon to administer the check-off. The company has provided information packages to explain to buyers of Saskatchewan canaryseed how to deduct the levy and submit it to the commission. Levy Central also administers the check-offs for the Saskatchewan Canola, Flax and Mustard Development Commissions. The CDCS office will be established alongside the Saskatchewan Canola Development Commission office in Saskatoon.

"The check-off will begin on May 1, 2006," says McVicar. "The interim board of directors will begin strategic planning within the next month to set the priorities for market research and development."

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